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WASHINGTON D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today expressed concern about the Egyptian government’s continued application of blasphemy-like charges that are used to stifle dissent and limit the freedoms of religion and expression.

Bassem Youssef, a well-known Egyptian comedian and satirist, was questioned on Monday April 1, 2013 by Egypt’s Public Prosecution office after being charged with “insulting Islam” on his popular television program. He also was charged with insulting the president and spreading false information aimed at threatening public order. On Wednesday, April 3, Egyptian comedian Ali Qandil was questioned after being charged with “insulting Islam,” based on a February appearance on Mr. Youssef’s program. Both Youssef and Qandil posted bail and were released. These are just two of the most recent examples of a disturbing trend that affects all Egyptians.

“Unfortunately, the Egyptian government’s use of blasphemy-like charges is nothing new,” said USCIRF Chair Katrina Lantos Swett. “However, these kinds of charges have increased significantly over the past two years and have chilled the dissenting views of not only Egyptian Muslims, but Christians and other minorities. In fact, during the democratic transition in Egypt, there has been a notable increase in ‘contempt of religion’ cases that disproportionately affect Coptic Orthodox Christians.”

Article 98(f) of Egypt's Penal Code prohibits blasphemy of the "divine" religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – and criminalizes "any use of religion to promote or advocate extremist ideologies...with a view toward stirring up sedition, disparaging or showing contempt for any divinely revealed religion, or prejudicing national unity and social harmony." Furthermore, Article 44 in Egypt's new constitution prohibits "insult or abuse of all religious messengers and prophets."

During a recent USCIRF visit to Egypt, government officials clearly stated their troubling view that there should be consequences, including criminal prosecution, for individuals who publicly make comments that may insult the religious feelings of others.

"Rather than limiting religious freedom and free expression, the Egyptian government should abolish 'contempt of religion' laws, and direct this prosecutorial energy towards government-funded clerics, government officials, or individuals who incite violence against individuals from Muslim or non-Muslim minority communities. Provisions in both the Egyptian penal code and constitution fly in the face of international human rights standards, which protect the right to freedom of religion and expression. These provisions must change if Egypt ever will realize its hopes for a genuine democracy," concluded Dr. Lantos Swett.

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